



## TRAVEL



Costa Rica is a peaceful, enlightened, democratic republic located in Central America and bordered by Nicaragua and Panama. While small in size (19,730 square miles, about the size of West Virginia) and population (4.1 million), Costa Rica ranks No. 1 among Latin American nations in environmental performance as of 2007-2008, according to studies conducted by the United Nations. In 2007, Costa Rica announced its goal to be the first country to become carbon neutral by 2021.

Costa Rica is noted for its excellent whitewater kayaking/rafting, thanks to two renowned rivers, the Rio Pacuare and the Rio Reventazon, located just two hours east of the capital of San Jose. The country offers spectacular rainforests, waterfalls, volcanoes and wildlife sanctuaries that make it a major tourist attraction.

Tourists from around the world visit this small nation to experience its extensive national parks and protected areas. Costa Rica has an incredible variety of exotic plants and animals and contains 5 percent of the world's biodiversity within only 0.1 percent of the world's landmass. At the national parks, tourists can view and interact with magnificent birds, big cats, tapirs, howler and capuchin monkeys, three-toed sloths and 320 species of birds and reptiles, as well as endangered species of turtles - leatherback, green, hawksbill and loggerhead - that come to the island to nest and lay their eggs. Spanish is the national language of Costa Rica and when speaking of their life and country, use the phrase "Pura Vida," which translates to "This is living."

Our destination was the famous Tabacon Grand Spa Thermal Resort in Fortuna, located near the base of the majestic Arenal Volcano and the Arena National Park. We expected an exotic paradise and we were not disappointed. The Tabacon Grand Spa Thermal Resort is located about 100 miles from San Jose. We arrived at the unique, inviting main entrance of the resort, naturally decorated and surrounded by luscious, wild and diverse flora and the sounds of the tropical rainforest. Costa Rica has only two seasons, which are "dry" and "green," affording a mild climate and fine weather year-round. At the front desk, we were welcomed first in Spanish, then in English. In Costa

Rica, Spanish is spoken more clearly and at a slower pace than in other Latin American countries. It took only minutes for our check-in and we were guided to our accommodations.

The name Tabacon originates back to a local hot spring pool and restaurant in the 1980s known as Balneario Tabacon. Our accommodations were, in a word, handsome, featuring cool earthy floor tiles and dark wooden doors and trimmings. It was so uniquely laid out that the suite appeared more spacious than it actually was. The dark wooden furniture and natural fabrics contrasted with the relaxed colors of the suite. The open-air bath facilities and sapphire blue bathtub created the overall feeling of style, comfortable, and serenely designed luxury.

We headed to a Sky Tram and Trek Tour that promised to be a truly exciting adventure. Although not normally adventurous, we had scheduled ourselves for one of the most thrilling experiences of our lives. We took the tram up to one of the many mid-Costa Rican jungle mountains. While gliding up the hill with ease, we couldn't believe the multitude of monkeys sitting and jumping around in the trees below us. We arrived at the Sky Tram platform where we were able to observe the dense flora and fauna of the jungle. We first tried a short trip with a guide in the harness. Our adrenaline was pumping as we zipped over the treetops, hanging high on cables. It was a breathtaking experience which we will never forget.

We were quite relieved to get back to the Grand Spa, where we experienced a new feeling of serenity involving spa services. Rediscovering the balance of body and soul, supported by the sounds, aromas and tastes of this enchanted jungle paradise and under the guidance of expertly trained therapists, was the goal of the afternoon. In the middle of this Garden of Eden we received exclusive spa treatments in open-air bungalows with private Jacuzzis that afforded a spectacular view of the volcano.

General Manager Uwe Wagner has had the natural mineral waters from the volcano analyzed by a top laboratory in Germany, where they were found to have an extremely high content of minerals and other healing elements. We all experienced an immediate effect on our bodies as the hot mineral waters of the Arenal Volcano opened our pores, allowing access to the healing elements.